

Interview with Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton
6 August 1997
Washington, D.C.

Q: The first thing I wanted to ask you about was the Black Women's Liberation Committee of SNCC? Do you recall that organization?

Eleanor Holmes Norton: No.

Q: There was an article in the *New York Times* in the 1970s that said you were the legal counsel for that particular...

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON: Probably for SNCC.

Q: Okay.

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON: I don't remember a separate unit in SNCC. There probably was one for people who were down there the whole time. I was in law school so I went back and forth. I was never specifically a part of that. There were problems between the men and the women. I think that was an expression of the women trying to deal with those problems.

Q: Okay, so then it became the Third World Women's Alliance and Francis Beal was involved with that. But I didn't know the division of labor or if Francis Beal was located in New York and you might have been in a different location.

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON: No, remember, I was not permanently there. I would go in the summertime.

Q: Right.

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON: And I think that was probably organized out of Atlanta, was it not?

Q: That's...I'm not sure because there's very little information on that.

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON: 'Cause that was where the main office, whereas most of our work was done in Mississippi ---Bob Moses and people like that.

Q: I haven't been able to find Francis Beal. I'd like to ask about the National Black Feminist Alliance [wrong org title]. Was it true that you were a founder?

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON: Yeah, I probably was. I don't specifically remember how we got started, but I certainly was involved --- you know, in New York.

Q: Okay. There was an article I read that said you were one of the thirty women who came together at a meeting to talk about organizing the group. And then later there was a coordinating council of seven members. Do you recall being a member?

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON: I just don't recall.

Q: Okay. Can you tell me how you came to be involved with the National Black Feminist Organization?

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON: Well, basically, when the feminist movement began to develop there was confusion in the black community because the civil rights movement had defined the movement, frankly. And the civil rights movement defined what a movement was in terms of disadvantage. That there are very disadvantaged white women and there are very rich white women, so there was confusion about where does this come from? **This thing that calls itself a movement doesn't look like us, people haven't had the same problems, how should we respond? There was some overt sexism, but mostly confusion.**



And there were too few black women willing---or able, I suppose---to step forward. Most important was Shirley Chisholm, who had no problem understanding that she was a woman and a black person. And some of us who regarded ourselves as a, kind of a, uh, frontier group in the black community believed it was our obligation. I was definitively a feminist, but I had come straight out of the guts of the civil rights movement. And I thought it particularly important for people like me who were known for straight out, um, um, black movement activity take a role in helping black women understand that being black and being a woman were---being a woman was as much a part of one's identity as being black. They had been expressed in different ways that black women had indeed suffered the problems of being women. The expression of those problems was often different from their expression among whites and often the same. And that kind of complexity seemed important to address, rather than let the movement---the black women either flounder or not respond constructively to a movement that addressed the most serious of their concerns. If the problems of women were more pronounced---the problems of women were more pronounced among black women so it seemed outrageous to allow feminism to by-pass the black community because there weren't black women willing to stand up and try to figure this out.

NBFO emerged out of confusion in how to respond to women's movement

Q: Do you recall the black community's response to the NBFO?

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON: The black community had within it inherently feminist responses that only need to be brought out. There was some sexism. I never will forget one---I believe it was in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania where some men [long pause]. I can't think of the particular incident. All I remember is women on welfare picketed them and that was the end of them. You had to straighten out the difference between the kind of genocide that one found occasionally in black history when people were operated on and the right of a woman to choice for abortion. That those are not the same thing. These issues---I think the proof of the pudding is the success that we've had in spreading feminist issues throughout the black community. Nobody runs up to you now and says, "We shouldn't be talking about women." We have to talk about women in a way that black women can identify. We also---I thought it would've been---I thought it a particular mistake for black women to develop a movement that had nothing to do with white women. We had something to do with African women, with Chinese women, with white women---the more we are together, the more we can press together. The greater the likelihood that our common concerns will be addressed. At the same time if we do not address the very special, deep concerns of black women then it would be impossible, we thought, for them to be incorporated as part of the larger women's movement.

response of black community

decline critique?

Q: So at that time, how do you feel that the NBFO articulated the issues differently?

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON: I don't remember. I mean, the way we always have.

Q: Well, we have the mission statement.

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON: Yeah, I don't---I haven't sat here twenty-five years later with that on the tip of my---**I think we spoke as black women but not as separatists.** We had a special identification and mission to black women in the black community and we were doing it ourselves as a part of the overall women's movement.

Mission statement not separation

Q: I believe that one part of the major statements was to lend credibility to the women's movement. That was something I got from a press conference.

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON: Sorry?

Q: When the NBFO was announced at a press conference you made the statement that part of the NBFO's mission was to lend credibility to the women's movement.

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON: Course not. **By being in the women's movement that became a more credible---we didn't have any mission to lend credibility to anybody.** You must be misreading that. Our mission could not have been to lend credibility to somebody else. **However, by being---the women's movement could only be credible, it seems to me, if that movement incorporated all women.** But we didn't have a mission to lend credibility. Our mission was, one, to help black women understand their problems and their possibilities as women. And, two, to join with the worldwide and nationwide women's movement that would be necessary to bring the kind of pressures to realize our goal. So we didn't form our movement to give credibility to some other movement.

Credibility to overall women's movement

Q: No, I think that---

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON: I don't think it said that either. You must be summarizing.

Q: Yeah, I am. As one part of what the NBFO was doing. Not as their whole---their goal. Do you recall if there were any splinter groups from the NBFO?

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON: **Splinter groups? We were a splinter group. We were a young, small group ourselves.**

Q: **For example, the Combahee River Collective...**

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON: **Never heard of it.**

Q: They were in Boston. **They were an NBFO chapter.**

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON: **If they were an NBFO chapter then they wouldn't of been a splinter group.**

Q: **They were a splinter group in that they said they advocated a more socialist feminist point of view than the NBFO did.**

Splinter group from main women's movement but mother to smaller orgs like Combahee

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON: I see. So then they were. I guess they could be. It wouldn't surprise me. **We were not into the difference between Democrats,**

Republicans or Socialists. We were into black women and trying to make sure the women's movement incorporated the needs of black women.

Q: Do you recall giving the keynote at the first conference that the NBFO had in New York?

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON: No. Did I [laughter]?

Q: One of the articles in *off our backs* said you gave a keynote address? It was at St. John of the Divine.

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON: No, but if it said I did, I'm sure---

Q: Do you keep copies of those sorts of things?

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON: I have some copies of my speeches, but going back that far I haven't gone through and looked through my basement. Besides, which I doubt that I would have written out a speech. I probably would have---I might have used notes. You know, I often do that and outline.

Q: Have you given any of your papers or anything to archives?

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON: No.

Q: Do you remember if there was a formal group structure to the organization? I know people paid dues, but---

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON: I don't remember there being a very formal structure. Like I can't remember if there was a chair or anything like that. There may have been.

Q: Something I read said that Margaret Sloan was the president.

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON: That sounds like it could be.

Q: Jane Galvin-Lewis was the vice-president?

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON: That sounds right. Those are the two women I do remember.

Q: Are you still in touch with them at all?

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON: Not really. I see Jane Galvin-Lewis occasionally. She'll come to Washington.

Q: Do you know what city she lives in?

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON: Probably---I don't know. Probably New York.

Q: What about Beverly Davis? She wrote a retrospective article in *SAGE*, a journal that comes out of Spelman. Beverly Guy-Sheftall works on it. She wrote a retrospective article on the NBFO. She mentions you. Do you recall any other women from the NBFO?

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON: Most of them I don't remember.

black women as political ideology but by not defining pol. id closes out dissenters? benign neglect?

Q: So do you feel that the organization met their goal of helping black women?

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON: Yes. Organizations---yes, I do, but organizations like SNCC and---these were movement organizations. Their goals were to move people and I think they did that. They moved people to a high level of consciousness and I think that NBFO played that role of moving black women to a high level of consciousness and so now we have a national political congress of black women, of which I was a founder. [interruption---staff] Sorry.

Q: You were talking about meeting the goals of the organization. Raising consciousness of black women.

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON: Yeah. Those goals, I think we helped to meet. Look, this was not a nationwide organization of great influence. It was like the early feminist organizations: small, raising consciousness, insisting upon its own missions, insisting that black women be a part of the women's movement. It's not as if it were some national organization which had access to the media and money or anything of that kind.

but they presented themselves as a national force who thinking through to the actual demands of such a position

Q: I've found that out by trying to do research. But it had local chapters and that's what I was curious about: if you recall how the organization might have worked with local chapters.

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON: The years I was with the organization---what years are we talking about?

Q: It started in 1973 and Beverly Davis estimates it ended in 1979.

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON: See, I was already Human Rights Commissioner of New York City and by then probably also executive assistant to the mayor. So I'm already a public official and, therefore, not deeply involved in the nuts and bolts of just keeping an organization going because you couldn't do that as a public official.

Q: So would you say you were in the organization or affiliated with it from say 1973 to---

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON: I would not be telling the truth if I told you I remembered anything about what my years were.

Q: Okay. Do you recall being in the group and working with other groups? Because you mentioned that black women needed to work with other organizations and not be separatists. Do you recall working with, say, NOW---

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON: I worked with NOW. I worked with all the feminist groups. I was Human Rights Commissioner of New York City. I regarded it as my job to work with all the feminist groups. I worked with all the civil rights groups, with all the ethnic groups, but I particularly---when I became Human Rights Commissioner of New York City hardly any women filed complaints about discrimination. I went to all the feminist groups and said, "Where are you?" The Human Rights Commission was there to serve women, not only blacks and Hispanics. Blacks were by far the only ones making complaints. So I literally went around the city trying to work people up to understand what discrimination was, so they would use the commission. It was a very strong commission, it had very strong law, but it wasn't being used by women. I also had the first hearing ever held. The first feminist hearings ever held in the New York City Commission. And the booklet [inaudible]

Q: I've seen that in *Feminism in Our Time*.

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON: Yeah. That has the hearing. That had all the testimony.

Q: And you said there wasn't a particular political orientation of the NBFO that you can recall. Wasn't Democrat---

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON: No.

Q: Do you recall if the organization had any adversaries?

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON: I don't recall any.

Q: Do you know of any other black feminist organizations that were active at the same time?

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON: No.

Q: How do you think the---

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON: I think the National---but I do believe the **National Council of Negro Women** regarded itself as feminist. I know it does now. And so I'm sure it was [inaudible]

Q: You say that they do now?

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON: I don't know about the sororities and fraternities. **Dorothy Height** has been a outspoken feminist so that I would think that that would bear looking into. **Where were they in those days? I would think they would have been there.**

Q: And that's part of the debate I've been having with a person on my committee, but I wanted to focus on groups that exclusively said at the time, "We are a black feminist organization." versus those who didn't. So that's something that I'm trying to work through right now.

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON: Oh, it didn't say that nationally?

Q: No. And neither do groups like the National Black Women's Health Project. In my opinion, it is a feminist organization.

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON: They won't say they are?

Q: It doesn't say that in the mission statement. This is a sociological dissertation, so I'm trying to go by missions statements and what kinds of things are articulated there versus my own perceptions of them. So this would be the prologue and the analysis of all the data.

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON: I wouldn't be surprised if---obviously, the **National Council of Negro Women** couldn't have said that in their mission statement because it began before feminism or the second wave began. But I wouldn't be surprised if in its papers around that same period, especially something like '73 to '79, I'd be very surprised if they were not in on something, speaking in feminist terms.

Q: I was wondering if you recall writing anything specifically about the NBFO?

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON: I don't recall.

Q: And also if you had any sorts of documentation of the organization?

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON: I haven't looked. In fact my papers now, uh, my papers now are not even---most of my papers going back to that period are at a research assistant's house, who I've had pull out my speeches for a book that I'm going to write. There might be NBFO stuff there.

You may have seen a piece, if you've done research this far, on a piece I wrote at the time called "Sadie and Maude". It's a piece that's been reprinted. It wasn't about the NBFO, but it was about black feminism. It was from a poem by [out of range of recorder---at bookshelves]. It was first published in Robin---what's her last name?

Q: Robin Morgan.

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON: Yeah. Robin Morgan's anthology was one of the first anthologies, if not the first, on black feminist writings.

Q: On black feminist writings?

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON: Oh, excuse me. Feminist writings. I'm sure it's in that anthology and it used to be in a revised one that she did. **But it give the spirit---it really is the spirit in NBFO.** Gwendolyn Brooks wrote a poem called "Sadie and Maude" and my thing may have been called, "For Sadie and Maude." I'm not sure what it was. "Sadie went to college. Maude stayed at home. Maude had a baby out of wedlock. Maude scraped life with a fine toothed comb." She's combing this child's hair. "Sadie is a thin, brown mouse. She is living all alone in this old house." So one was a black woman who tried to pursue her talents and ended up without a man. And the other was a woman who ended up without a man, too, even though she had had a baby. And in a real sense, black women had to confront that. That---to say that being black was everything when Sadie and Maude in a real sense describes the lives of millions of black women. And that just came out of that poem.

Q: Well, this was very helpful. [laugh] You may not think so, but it---

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON: I'm just sorry I didn't have more stuff to give you.

Q: Well, if you recall anyone or run into anyone you think might be helpful [blah, blah, blah]

END OF INTERVIEW